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Trade Union Congress Ends Not With A Bang But A Whimper

The Seventh Congress of the Polish Central Association of Trade Unions has come and gone with only minor problems. About 1,700 delegates, representing nearly 10 million Polish workers, spent three days (13-15 November) hearing speeches and holding debates and discussions. They were not totally willing, however, to rubber stamp all of the regime's labor proposals. Only one of the three major tasks assigned to this congress--the election of trade union officials for the next four years--went pretty much according to plan. The trade union charter proposed by the government was strongly criticized, though eventually accepted. But the draft labor code, which was presented to the delegates with much fanfare, came in for sharp criticism and is to be rewritten; the delegates apparently felt that the guarantees of worker and union rights, as outlined in the draft code, were too narrow and too vaguely defined.

The embassy speculates that the workers' somewhat surprising militancy indicates their growing awareness of their own political clout and interest in organizing their unions into a more viable and responsive political pressure group. The regime, on the other hand, may have hoped to use this congress to establish in the eyes of the workers the view that the party and not the unions is the legitimate vehicle for articulation of their grievances and thus institutionalize (and control) their political power. If this is true, then the rejection of the draft labor code could be seen as a setback for the regime. There is a temptation, however, to read too much into the rejection of the code and the workers' grievances. Although sources of discontent for the Polish worker do exist (have existed for a long time and will continue to exist), the average Pole also realizes that he is better off today than he was two years ago and he is more than willing to give party chief Gierek due credit for this and to go along with the regime.

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